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Peacekeeping by Wishful Thinking

JAMES H. TONER

Pollyanna is a young heroine in a novel by Eleanor H. Parker. Today we give the character's name to anyone who seems excessively or persistently optimistic. In the important public debate about arms control and disarmament, there are invariably a number of Pollyannas whose sincere if misguided faith that everything is almost certainly going to turn out well may, in fact, be dangerously counterproductive.

Certain popular nostrums, for example, crowd the usual public commentaries about disarmament. These nostrums, despite—or perhaps because of—their popularity, coexist rather tentatively with reality. The popularity of such political placebos as *The Fate of the Earth*, by Jonathan Schell, testifies to the broadly felt yearning for an end to all our troubles. Schell offers this remedy for the ills of contemporary nuclear politics:

If we are serious about nuclear disarmament—the minimum technical requirement for real safety from extinction—then we must accept conventional disarmament as well, and this means disarmament not just of nuclear powers but of all powers, for the present nuclear powers are hardly likely to throw away their conventional arms while non-nuclear powers hold on to theirs We must [therefore] lay down our arms, relinquish sovereignty, and found a political system for the peaceful settlement of international disputes.¹

For those who might have missed his point, Schell elaborates in unmistakable terms: “In sum, the task is nothing less than to reinvent politics: to reinvent the world.”² Now no person of any sense or sensitivity will argue against what Schell entirely correctly fears and deplores: The

human race *is* in jeopardy of extinction by its own hand. But Schell's breathtaking assertions about reinventing politics call for serious analysis rather than the mere orchestration of high emotion.

Schell is hardly alone. Consider the recent book by Dr. Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War*. The temper and tone of her book are revealed in such remarks as this: "When I visited Europe two years ago, I was shocked to discover that NATO was not really our 'Western allies' but was, in fact, controlled and run by the US government." Or this: "By this act of war [invading Grenada], the United States simultaneously violated international law and deeply offended the people of Great Britain." This spectacularly obtuse book indicates that, after all, one FDR adviser found Stalin to be a "reasonable man"; the Korean War was really "a conflict inspired overwhelmingly by local problems"; and "Cuba now has one of the best medical schemes in the world." Dr. Caldicott has gained a highly deserved reputation as a crusading physician, investing enormous time and energy to tell us (entirely correctly) that nuclear war means the very probable end of humanity. "Preventing nuclear war," she writes, "is the ultimate parenting issue; nothing else matters."³

Let us imagine a new crusade against something which all human beings—regardless of their religious, ethical, or political convictions—can truly hate: cancer. Suppose that one writer informs us that cancer can kill and urges us to end this dread disease at once. Are we to dispute that? Another writer tells us that we must inform humanity about cancer and laments its insidious and deadly spread. Are we to dispute that? Yet a third writer implores us to denounce cancer; we must hold rallies and march and sign petitions and urge our representatives in Congress to vote against cancer. Would some thinking individual at that point not say something to this effect: "I understand and wholly agree that cancer is a vile thing. I too desire its immediate end. But the question, after all, is *how*." How, Mr. Schell, are we to reinvent politics? How, Dr. Caldicott, are we to prevent nuclear war? One seeks without success for Schell's answer. Dr. Caldicott, apparently, has the answer, although she offers it through Walter Cronkite. Preparing for nuclear war, she suggests, is "total immorality"; hence the solution, presumably, is not to prepare for war:

Newsman Walter Cronkite recently told me that for years he has been in favor of unilateral nuclear disarmament. He thinks that America should totally

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disarm within ten years and some of the money saved should be used to create satellites and communications systems to educate the people of the world about how to live in peace. The money could also be used for food programs and to help the industrial conversion process from weapons to peace. He said that he favors passive resistance—that if tens of thousands of people just sat down in front of Soviet tanks, what could they do? He said we should make the arms negotiators sit at the table, and stop the clock and lock the door until they achieve appropriate arms reductions.⁴

There is much in Caldicott's book that will sadden the reader. Helen Caldicott is a woman who, very much to her credit, is deeply worried about the lives of us all. But one wonders whether she ever seriously reflects upon the idea that the kind of, well, ingenuous balderdash just quoted might very well undermine or destroy the foundation of the nuclear peace we have enjoyed these forty years. One replies, plaintively, "For the sake of God and humanity, madam, will you not recognize that the peace we all prize so dearly is preserved best by the prudent management of power, not naively wishing it out of existence." Scientists and medical researchers, after all, perhaps hate cancer far more than anyone else; they have made its control and elimination their life-long study. Yet they know that detesting cancer (however justified), fearing its contraction (however understandable), and desiring fervently to rid the earth of this plague (however admirable) will not make the disease vanish. We need not Pollyannas, but research in reality.

And so it is with nuclear weapons. Three or four years ago, deeply concerned about the terrible simplicity of the nuclear arms debate, a nuclear study group was formed at Harvard University. Led by scholars such as Albert Carnesale, Paul Doty, Stanley Hoffman, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joseph Nye, Jr., the group published *Living With Nuclear Weapons*, the purpose of which was to provide "necessary information and an overall approach to aid concerned citizens in addressing the central problem of our time."⁵ Their central conclusion was this:

Atomic escapism must be avoided. One form of escapism is to believe that nuclear weapons will go away. They will not. Because they will not, mankind must learn to live with them if we are to live at all. The other form of escapism is to think that nuclear weapons can be treated like other military weapons in history. They cannot. And because they are different, humanity must live with them carefully, vigilantly, gingerly, always displaying the utmost caution.⁶

As political scientist Michael Mandelbaum has so well pointed out, there are two fundamental approaches to altering the international system. The Schell-Caldicott themes conform to what Mandelbaum labels the "radical approach," which calls for the abolition of national armaments altogether. Mandelbaum explains:

This, in turn, requires abolishing the incentives for states to have armaments. They have them because of the insecurity that arises from the anarchical structure of the international system. So the requirement for disarmament is the disappearance of anarchy, in favor of an international system organized along the lines of the state in domestic politics. States must give up sovereignty.⁷

Unfortunately, as Mandelbaum says, "Sovereignty has stood, from the time of Thucydides to the present, as the unbudgeable obstacle to disarmament."⁸ Desperate appeals for the elimination of nuclear weapons, for an end to sovereignty, and for the creation of universal brotherhood are indeed understandable and perhaps commendable. But like the Dickensian character Micawber, we may err in too readily expecting that "something will turn up." Mandelbaum continues:

The second way of changing the international system to prevent war is more modest. It is less certain to stifle international conflict than is disarmament, but it has proven easier to carry out. It accepts anarchy. It accepts the idea that political differences among sovereign states will arise and that these will give grounds for conflict. It tries to keep conflict within bounds in two ways: by promoting rules of conduct to govern relations among the most important states, and by arranging the distribution of military might in the system so that no single state can hope to gain preponderance. This approach has historically been known as the "balance of power."⁹

The international system that now exists offers a precarious balance of terror, to use the Churchillian term. It was Churchill's grandson who recently pleaded with us not to destroy the very system which has effectively deterred the horrors of nuclear war by abandoning it in the pursuit of paradise.¹⁰ One is reminded of the dictum of the 18th-century French diplomat Talleyrand: "Above all, not too much zeal." "History," Paul Johnson observes, "shows us the truly amazing extent to which intelligent, well-informed and resolute men, in the pursuit of economy or in an altruistic passion for disarmament, will delude themselves about realities."¹¹

This quixotic quest to abolish nuclear weaponry is highlighted by such beliefs as these: (1) the danger of war is in direct proportion to the number of weapons in the world; (2) arms reductions would make war less destructive if it came; (3) the application of science and technology to the development of weapon systems is in itself a threat to peace and should be inhibited; and (4) arms control provides an alternative—a preferable alternative—to armament as a means of ensuring international security. These conceptions are the kind of generally accepted nostrums which "inform" public debate about arms control. But what appears simple can

be, in fact, simpleminded. As Michael Howard points out, politicians should repudiate these simple-minded illusions. As to the causal effects of armaments, for example, "Some wars have been preceded by intensive armaments competitions; others—and the great majority over the past 150 years—have not."¹² Wars occur because nations think they can win.¹³

Similarly, Howard suggests that "the destructiveness of a war is determined not so much by the capacity of belligerents to inflict punishment as by their readiness to endure it." Are science and technology merely evil? Professor Howard points out that "had all nuclear tests been abandoned 30 years ago, nuclear stockpiles would still consist of the vulnerable, inaccurate, and hideously destructive weaponry of that era, and it is not self-evident that the world would be more peaceful or secure as a result."¹⁴

Despite the historical record, however, the attraction of disarmament lives on. Professor Howard explains why:

The illusion that arms reductions would in themselves make peace more secure and that total disarmament would make it perpetual is so deeply rooted and so widespread as to constitute an ineluctable political fact that has to be accommodated into our [public] policy. It is, as it were, a Platonic "noble lie": governments themselves may not believe it, but it is an aspiration to be encouraged and not discouraged—and anyhow, no Western politician dares confront his or her electorate and tell them frankly that they were wrong. Governments must be seen to be striving to attain the heavenly city of disarmament.¹⁵



Above, "The Great American Peace March" at the gates of the Army War College in October 1986. Our author asserts, however, that "we cannot preserve peace by mere wishful thinking."

If the writings of such people as Schell and Caldicott are such transparent nonsense, and if, as may be safely expected, our public figures and media people are, after all, reasonably discerning and intelligent, then why is it that the Pollyannas are not so branded? Perhaps Walter Lippmann had the best answer for that question thirty years ago:

[Politicians] are in effect perpetual office seekers, always on trial for their political lives, always required to court their restless constituents. They are deprived of their independence. Democratic politicians rarely feel they can afford the luxury of telling the whole truth to the people. And since not telling it, though prudent, is uncomfortable, they find it easier if they themselves do not have to hear too often too much of the sour truth. The men under them who report and collect the news come to realize in their turn that it is safer to be wrong before it has become fashionable to be right.¹⁶

Politicians and journalists are unlikely to increase their vote totals or their newspaper circulations by dwelling on the lugubrious facts of political life. As a nation, we are always in a hurry for "breakthroughs." Cecil Crabb's analysis is excellent:

Americans have found it difficult to accept *partial solutions* to age-old problems disturbing the peace and security of the international community. Their usual expectation is that such problems will be "solved" within a relatively short time and that the tensions between nations will be "eliminated" by some dramatic development like an East-West summit conference or a new non-aggression treaty. For reasons that are not altogether apparent, Americans have been slow to apply a lesson that emerges from their own experience with countless internal problems, like divorce, delinquency, alcoholism, traffic accidents, crime, poverty, and many other issues. This is that few problems in human affairs are ever "solved" in a final sense. They are ameliorated, softened, mitigated, made endurable, adjusted to, outlived—but seldom eliminated.¹⁷

To tell the American people that the problems created by nuclear weapons—indeed, created by the nature of humans themselves—will never go away requires inordinate courage. And few Churchill-like leaders are on the horizon. Lippmann, who did not have to campaign for office, could be brutally frank:

With exceptions so rare that they are regarded as miracles and freaks of nature, successful democratic politicians are insecure and intimidated men. They advance politically only as they placate, appease, bribe, seduce, bamboozle, or otherwise manage to manipulate the demanding and threatening elements in their constituencies.¹⁸

Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson believed that the American people "can never do what is necessary until they understand what is necessary, and why; and they will never understand that until their leaders in government, business, and labor are willing to tell them." What bothered Acheson was that "this takes more courage—and vision too—than most leaders, trained and aspiring to succeed in a special and limited constituency, have at their command."¹⁹

In the adult world of international politics, power relationships must be understood and managed—if we are to keep the peace. It is particularly important for Americans to absorb this lesson, since American influence in preserving the peace is likely to be decisive. We cannot expect to preserve peace by mere wishful thinking. The problem is that the truth about the balance of terror is not pleasant and, as George Kennan has told us, the "truth about external reality will never be wholly compatible with those internal ideological fictions which the national state engenders and by which it lives."²⁰ In William Barrett's study of existentialism, he reports a conversation between Sartre and an American. The latter insisted that all international problems could be solved if men would just get together and be rational; Sartre disagreed and discussion between them became impossible. "I believe in the existence of evil," Sartre said, "and he does not." Barrett's conclusion was that "what the American has not yet become aware of is the shadow that surrounds all human Enlightenment."²¹

Confronted by a popular mythology which often suggests that peace is available virtually for the asking, leaders, sycophantic and saccharine, truckle to Pollyannas in endorsing schemes which sometimes, in their simplicity, may undermine rather than support the structures of peace. As Hans Morgenthau once pointed out in a brilliant but little-known essay, "One of the main purposes of society is to conceal these truths [about power] from its members."²² Radicals, the total disarmers, resist the truth about the political order: that power and conflict exist; that evil is a reality; that war and peace issues turn on the prudent management of international negotiation by skilled statesmen. Arthur T. Hadley, in his book *The Straw Giant*, puts it this way:

In their passionate protestations of a higher rationality I hear the desperate pleas of those who fear they are about to lose control over their unconscious selves. Frightened by the violence of their turmoil, they fly to the world of Rousseau, where man is essentially good. If generals and barbed wire and nuclear weapons could be done away with, we could then reinvent the world and live in peace. They scorn any rational thought about warfare, believing such thought evil in itself. Joyce Carol Oates has accurately limned this attitude: "It is very tempting . . . this disavowal of intelligence, this sub-religious gesture of surrender to the senses and emotions, to death."²³

In confronting this dilemma of democratic politics, Professor Morgenthau suggested that "the Government is the leader of public opinion, not its slave"—or ought to be.²⁴ The statesman, he implied, must lead. Yet a terrible gap exists between the popular—and wrong—nostrums so prevalent in the West and the more seasoned (one hopes) realizations of prudent political leaders. Henry Kissinger ventures to suggest: "If the desire for peace turns into an avoidance of conflict at all costs, if the just disparage power and seek refuge in their moral purity, the world's fear of war becomes a weapon of blackmail by the strong; peaceful nations, large or small, will be at the mercy of the most ruthless."²⁵

Kissinger has contended that "the balance of power, a concept much maligned in American political writing—rarely used without being preceded by the pejorative 'outdated'—has in fact been the precondition of peace."²⁶ Let us suppose, with Kissinger, that it is precisely the maintenance of the balance of nuclear power which has prevented, through deterrence, the waging of nuclear war. But let us further suppose that the Pollyannas are now effective in undermining the deterrence which they refuse to accept as the basis of the peace. If Kissinger is right, and if the Pollyannas undermine that precondition of peace, then they unwittingly contribute to the onset of the nuclear horror which they rightly fear.

Kissinger, alas, is not in vogue, and Morgenthau is dead, his once extremely popular text reviled by certain students who might profit so well by it.²⁷ "The modern philosophy of disarmament," Morgenthau told us, "proceeds from the assumption that men fight because they have arms [But] men do not fight because they have arms. They have arms because they deem it necessary to fight." Further, in the spirit of Talleyrand, Morgenthau averred that "diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit. This is the first of the rules that diplomacy can neglect only at the risk of war."²⁸

We all might profitably reread the myth of Icarus, for in trying to fly on wings of wax toward the sun of disarmament, we may instead go crashing into the sea of war. The Harvard Study Group—not Schell—is right: "Living with nuclear weapons is our only hope. It requires that we persevere in reducing the likelihood of war even though we cannot remove the possibility altogether." The task is not without idealism: "This challenge will be both demanding and unending, but we need not perish if practical steps continue to be taken. Surely there is no greater test of the human spirit."²⁹

Can we not relearn that "it is as fatal in politics to ignore power as it is to ignore morality"?³⁰ Can we not relearn the vitality of politics? Can we not relearn the importance of a vigorous national leadership based not upon the pursuit of rainbows, but rather upon the rock-solid foundation of historical realities about the enduring (if not always genial) presence of power and sovereignty?

Our task, Mr. Schell, is not to reinvent politics; rather, we must rediscover the political process which enables us to pursue an intelligent and effective diplomacy. And, no, Dr. Caldicott, unilateral disarmament will not bring us the peace which surpasseth all understanding. We do far better in an imperfect world to stand by the wisdom of Winston Churchill: "The day may dawn when fair play, love for one's fellow man, respect for justice and freedom, will enable tormented generations to march forth serene and triumphant from the hideous epoch in which we have to dwell. Meanwhile, never flinch, never weary, never despair."³¹

NOTES

1. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Avon, 1982), p. 226.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War* (New York: Bantam, 1986), pp. 96, 140, 182, 184, 250, and 307.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-12. "All weapons systems," she insists, "must be *verboten*; the nuclear freeze must be immediate and mandatory" (p. 302).
5. Albert Carnesale, et al., *Living With Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Bantam, 1983), p. x.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
7. Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution* (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1981), p. 11.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
10. Winston Churchill, grandson of the former British prime minister, appears in a debate with the Reverend William S. Coffin in a film done for the Shavano Institute of Hillsdale College (Mich.).
11. Paul Johnson, *Modern Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 175.
12. Michael Howard, "Illusions that Fuel Pressure for Arms Control," *The Atlantic Community Quarterly*, 24 (Summer 1986), 119.
13. See, e.g., Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), ch. 3.
14. Howard, pp. 119-20.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
16. Walter Lippman, *The Public Philosophy* (New York: Mentor, 1955), p. 28.
17. Cecil V. Crabb, Jr., *American Foreign Policy in the Nuclear Age*, 3d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 31.
18. Lippman, p. 28.
19. Dean Acheson, *Power and Diplomacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1958), pp. 27-28.
20. George Kennan, "History and Diplomacy as Viewed by a Diplomatist," in *Diplomacy in a Changing World*, ed. S. D. Kertesz and M. A. Fitzsimons (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1959), p. 108.
21. William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 272-73.
22. Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Nature and Limits of a Theory of International Relations," in *Theoretical Aspects of International Relations*, ed. William T. R. Fox (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1959), p. 22.
23. Arthur T. Hadley, *The Straw Giant* (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 241.
24. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, rev. by Kenneth W. Thompson, 6th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 591.
25. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 238.
26. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 195.
27. Some students of mine, attending an international affairs conference at a well-known New England women's college, were told by some students there that Morgenthau's text merely offered excuses for the use of violence. From the conversation it apparently was not clear whether they had actually read any of Morgenthau; one doubts it.
28. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 436, 584. His main point, succinctly put, is this: "Without political settlement, disarmament has no chance for success" (p. 432).
29. Carnesale, et al., *Living With Nuclear Weapons*, p. 255.
30. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 97.
31. Winston Churchill, 1 March 1955, in *Parliamentary Debates*, 5th Series, vol. 537, col. 1905.